

Everybody's Movement: Environmental Justice and Climate Change

WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY ANGELA PARK



Environmental Support Center
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Executive Summary

Climate change is one of the highest-stakes, transformative issues of our lifetime.

Everybody's Movement: Environmental Justice and Climate Change features the perspectives and wisdom of twenty-three activists and funders who are engaged in or supporting work to connect environmental justice and climate change. In this report, these leaders from across the United States share their perspectives about how their movement can contribute to climate organizing, policy, and solutions. They also speak about how their movement can be strengthened by better integrating climate issues into the content of environmental justice.

While climate change has name recognition amidst the white noise of modern life, the success of the movement for implementing climate solutions and decreasing the concentration of carbon dioxide to 350 parts per million is far from assured. For climate change to become a priority for U.S. voters and households, for it to become everybody's movement, a stronger connection must be made between global warming and people's daily lives. The broad and vibrant response necessary to address climate change and serve as a counterweight to special interests in oil and coal industries requires the engagement of more people, from a wider array of society.

In addition, while many people of color and low-income communities regard climate change and the environment as priorities, the climate change movement still remains highly homogenous by race and class and significantly by gender in its leadership. Even in 2009, climate briefings held across the country consistently feature mostly male and all-white casts. Like other pockets of environmental and conservation movements, climate change still suffers from the perception, and arguably the reality, that it is a movement led by and designed for the interests of the white, upper-middle class. Many people erroneously believe that interest in environmental issues is dependent on race, education, and class. To the contrary, growing numbers of people of color working in the environmental field and public polling demonstrate that reality often differs from conventional assumptions.

The demographic ground is fundamentally shifting and changing the U.S. population and culture in unprecedented ways. People of color and indigenous peoples now comprise one third of the U.S. population. By 2042, demographers project they will be the majority and by 2050, they will constitute 54 percent of the nation's population.

These trends are not just numbers. They signal inevitable, transformative shifts in values, culture, and political power in American life. Fundamental changes are already being felt in American cultural and political discourse. To ignore these historic trends and their impact on the climate change movement, seems disconnected, at best. A mono-cultural climate

change movement is counter-intuitive to long-term growth and effectiveness. Strength in diversity could defuse the perception that environmentalists are a narrow, easily marginalized, out-of-touch elite. It would support their work to make policy solutions not only equitable but also transformative, creating positive economic and environmental ripple effects throughout society.

Framing climate change

When many Americans think of climate change, they think most often of the framing that has dominated mainstream environmental discourse: polar bears; melting ice caps; scientific studies; parts per million; Washington, DC, lobbyists; and United Nations convenings. Reductions in carbon emissions are the goal, and economic and technological fixes are the solution.

The environmental justice movement approaches climate change differently. Environmental justice activists focus on the way climate change affects communities, is embedded in social justice, impacts public health, and is intertwined with transportation and industrial facilities. They analyze the connections between the abuse of the environment and the oppression of people with the least power, including the poor, immigrants, women, and people of color. They focus not only on the degradation of nature but also on the degradation of communities and the loss of traditional means of economic support as the environment is changed. They perceive and analyze global warming through people's memories and experiences rather than solely through data gathered by scientific experts and portrayed by national policy advocates.

While climate change is typically framed as a universal, global problem, a message that focuses solely on the universality of global warming and its impacts can push many people away, instead of motivating them to join the cause. In addition, universal approaches to addressing climate change may exacerbate existing environmental, economic, and social inequities.

Many polls show that people of color are more likely to support strong environmental and climate policies than whites. Many environmental justice activists see the lack of immediate interest in climate change as an issue of messaging and content, more than one of inherent disdain. Many, if not most, people feel they have little time and energy to spare. One need not live in a community suffering dire social, economic, or environmental circumstances to feel somewhat removed from the urgency of climate change. The extra effort of engagement and outreach is a matter of degrees.

To many activists, the climate change movement has given up too easily on reaching new constituencies, especially those who don't currently mirror the demographics of the environmental field. The self-fulfilling prophecy is one that says: "Those people don't care about the environment or about climate change. So we shouldn't use our precious time and resources trying to engage them."

And yet, significant data tell us those untapped constituencies are more likely to support strong climate policies than those already engaged. And those suffering the most from current energy and environmental policies have the most to gain. There is a compelling argument for rethinking who is worthy of engagement.

Barriers to fruitful collaboration

There are immense challenges to collaboration between environmental justice activists and the environmentalists who lead the climate change movement. They come from different worlds, have different agendas, set different priorities, and use different processes. Race, class, and power dynamics are significant barriers to productive collaboration.

These barriers—embedded in the culture and histories of the environmental justice movement and the environmental field—will remain, elephants in an empty room, until it is clear that partnership is critical to the viability and success of each movement. If both movements are thriving, easily achieving their goals independently, there is no need for change. While few indicators point to such success, resistance to change currently prevails.

Strategies for building a movement for everyone

Environmental justice is evolving as a framework for social change in the early 21st century. Within that evolution lie significant opportunities for integrating climate change. Environmental justice activists and funders identified six areas for building the capacity and leadership of the environmental justice movement on climate:

- Strategy 1:** Increase community groups' capacity and access to scientific data, communications expertise, and economic analysis
- Strategy 2:** Deepen climate policy expertise and implement political strategies based on environmental justice values
- Strategy 3:** Expand creation and distribution of climate justice materials
- Strategy 4:** Support networking and information sharing through adoption of new technologies
- Strategy 5:** Acknowledge issues of scale while building expertise at multiple levels
- Strategy 6:** Build development capacity and better integrate environmental justice into existing funding streams

Currently, climate change is not everybody's movement in the United States. New thinking and action will be necessary for these two movements to work together. Everyone will have to take risks or suffer a shared fate of failure.

If we fail to take risks, to overcome fears of engaging across difference, to acknowledge the history and address the barriers that have stood in the way of more effective collaboration across movements, history will hold us accountable for the legacy we leave behind in the climate our children and future generations will inherit.

With relatively few resources, the environmental justice movement has built a foundation of local and neighborhood credibility and community empowerment. It has created sophisticated political education and leadership development programs that speak to and engage the people who have the most to gain from a truly just and sustainable future and the most to lose from the existing fossil fuel economy. This political force and these authentic voices have yet to be fully tapped.